Study: Berries good for the heart

By Melissa Healy, Los Angeles Times

Younger women who ate at least three servings per week of strawberries or blueberries reduced their likelihood of suffering a heart attack by one-third compared with their sisters who incorporated fewer of the colorful berries into their diet, a study says.

The berry benefit was sufficiently strong that it held even after researchers adjusted for age, high blood pressure, family history of heart attack, body-mass index, exercise, smoking, and caffeine or alcohol intake. Researchers suggested that a group of dietary flavenoids called anthocyanins, which give blueberries and strawberries their jewel-like colors, may be responsible for the health benefits seen in the study's large sample of subjects.

Anthocyanins are known to dilate arteries and counter the buildup of plaque that causes atherosclerosis.

The latest finding, published in the American Heart Association's journal, Circulation, comes from the Nurses' Health Study II. In that study, about 93,600 women ages 25 to 42 answered detailed surveys about their diets every four years for 18 years.

During the study period, 405 heart attacks occurred – a rate that is predictably low because the women in the study had not yet reached the age at which heart disease is most likely to show up in women. But the study subjects who ate the most strawberries and blueberries, three or more servings weekly, were 32 percent less likely to be among the group who suffered early heart attack than were women who ate fewer berries – even women whose diets were otherwise rich in fruits and

vegetables.

“This simple dietary change could have a significant impact on prevention efforts,” said Dr. Eric Rimm, professor of nutrition and epidemiology at Harvard School of Public Health and senior author of the paper. Rimm and his coauthors surmised that if berry consumption showed such measurable health effects early in life, its benefits were likely to show up later as well, when women’s heart attack rate more closely approximates that of men.

The authors said they looked specifically at strawberries and blueberries because they are the most commonly consumed berries in the United States. But other berries, including raspberries, may have similar effects, they said.

Free pancakes at IHOP

IHOP is celebrating National Pancake Day on Feb. 5 by giving out free pancakes.

It’s also a day to raise money for Children’s Miracle Network Hospitals. The goal is to raise $3 million.

During National Pancake Day more than 1,500 IHOP restaurants – including South Lake Tahoe – invite guests to enjoy a complimentary stack of IHOP’s signature delicious buttermilk pancakes from 7am-10pm. Guests will be encouraged to make a voluntary contribution to the local Children’s Miracle Network Hospital or other local charities. One hundred percent of the donations will help local charities provide vital equipment, life-saving procedures and critical care for sick and injured children.

For more information on National Pancake Day, or to learn about Children's Miracle Network Hospitals and make an online donation, go online.

K's Kitchen: Scoring with tortilla soup

By Kathryn Reed

Sue was celebrating two winners Saturday night – the San Francisco 49ers and her new favorite soup.



Her enthusiasm for the Niners may not be long lived. While she has been a Colin Kaepernick fan all season, her true love is the Pittsburgh Steelers. And if the Niners were to win the Super Bowl (yes, there's still the NFC Championships to get through next weekend), it would mean they would tie the Steelers for the most Super Bowl wins at six.

Time will tell if her taste buds will be as fickle as her football allegiance – or as strong – since time will also reveal if Franco Harris or Kaepernick are her favorites.

At least today, Crock Pot Tortilla Soup is her favorite soup. She says the spices and heartiness are what she loves about this soup.

We have my friend Patty to thank for the recipe. She was right

in knowing I could make it into a vegetarian creation that we would like. This is the link to the original recipe from We Are Not Martha.

Below is my adaptation of it. Patty made the original version with chicken. She thought it could use more beans.

The next time I think if I had tortilla chips in the house, I would crumble them on top instead of making the tortilla strips. I used Monterey Jack cheese because that's usually what we have in the house.

Crockpot Tortilla Soup

1 medium onion, chopped

2 T garlic, minced

1 jalapeno, minced

¼ C cilantro, chopped

2 cans diced tomatoes, drained

4 C veggie broth

2 cans black beans, drained

1 can corn, drained

2 T tomato paste

1 T chili powder

1 T ground cumin

1-2 avocados, chopped

Flour tortillas

Canola oil

Shredded cheese of choice

Put all of the ingredients up to the avocados into the crockpot. It could cook all day, but does not need to.

When you are ready to serve the soup, heat the oil in a pan. Put cut up tortilla strips into the hot oil, which should be about one-quarter inch deep.

Put tortilla strips, some cheese and avocado on top of soup.

FDA proposes sweeping new food safety rules

By Neela Banerjee and Alana Semuels, Los Angeles Times

The Food and Drug Administration has proposed sweeping rules to curtail food-borne illnesses that kill thousands of Americans annually – and, in the process, to transform itself into an agency that prevents contamination, not one that merely investigates outbreaks.

The rules, drafted with an eye toward strict standards in California and some other states, enable the implementation of the landmark Food Safety Modernization Act that President Obama signed two years ago in response to a string of deadly outbreaks of illness from contaminated spinach, eggs, peanut butter and imported produce.

The first proposed rule would require domestic and overseas

producers of food sold in the U.S. to craft a plan to prevent and deal with contamination of their products. The plans would be open to federal audits. The second rule would address contamination of fruit and vegetables during harvesting.

One in six Americans suffers from a food-borne illness annually, a “substantial burden” on the country, according to the FDA. Of those who get sick, about 130,000 end up hospitalized and 3,000 die.

A salmonella outbreak in peanut butter last fall prompted the FDA to shut down a New Mexico production facility of Sunland Inc. and initiate a mass recall from retailers such as Trader Joe’s. A listeria outbreak in several states last year also killed dozens of people.

“The FDA Food Safety Modernization Act is a common-sense law that shifts the food safety focus from reactive to preventive,” Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said Friday in releasing the proposals.

The outbreaks of the last several years pushed consumer advocates and much of the food industry to back more stringent standards.

Many welcomed the proposed rules, although consumer advocates pointed out that the standards were delayed in the White House a year past their congressionally mandated due date, giving rise to concerns that the Obama administration sought to avoid any political fallout in an election year.

The 2011 food safety act, the most comprehensive overhaul of the food industry in 70 years, was to be built on three sets of regulations, not just the two issued Friday, said Caroline Smith DeWaal, food safety director at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a Washington consumer advocacy group.

The third rule, which has yet to be issued, would establish how food importers would verify that the products they bring

in meet U.S. standards.

Last year more than 800 cases of illness were caused in the U.S. by contaminated imported tuna flakes, cantaloupes, mangoes and ricotta cheese, DeWaal said, citing data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“It’s supposed to be a three-legged stool in terms of consumer protection,” DeWaal said, “and one leg is still missing.”

The FDA said developing the complex new rules took time as it consulted “consumers, government, industry, researchers and many others,” and “studied, among many other sources, the California leafy greens marketing agreement.” Additional rules will “follow soon,” the agency said.

The California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement, formed in 2007 after an E.coli outbreak tied to spinach crops, mandates that farmers fund government audits of their food safety processes. Melon growers in California have a similar agreement and last year made it mandatory, said Stephen Patricio, president of Westside Produce in Firebaugh which grows, packs and ships melons.

“California has the most stringent requirements,” Patricio said. “It’s the culture of food safety that is important, and California farmers have been working on the culture of food safety for a decade.”

As a result, the proposed federal regulations aren’t expected to force substantial changes in the way many crops in California are handled. Melons in the state also have a mandatory code on every box that is shipped that would allow authorities to track where the fruit came from and when it was harvested, a policy that was proposed in the new regulations.

Eric Hanagan already has implemented some of the policies suggested in the proposed guidelines.

Hanagan's 1,500-acre farm, which grows melons and vegetables in the Rocky Ford area of Colorado, was hit hard when a nearby farm was blamed for a 2011 listeria outbreak that killed 25 people. In response, Hanagan and other farmers adopted rules that they hoped would restore the region's reputation.

His vegetables are now shipped with codes that allow them to be tracked, and every winter he and other regional farmers go to classes about food safety. Hanagan's farm is inspected twice a year by the state, one of the inspections unannounced. Inspectors talk to each worker individually and regulate what kind of shoes, clothes and jewelry they can wear.

Hanagan estimates that the regulations cost medium-sized farms about $5,000 to $7,500 a year, which includes the cost of time for training workers and attending classes. But, he said, it's worth every penny.

"We need to have safe food, because if you get a consumer sick, you're done," he said. Jensen Farms, the Colorado farm blamed for the listeria outbreak, filed for bankruptcy in May.

The FDA will gather public comment for 120 days before finalizing the rules. Large farms would have 26 months to comply with most of the new requirements after the final rules are published; smaller farms would have longer.

College students with food allergies make legal gains

By Eliza Barclay, NPR

Many a college student lives off of microwavable meals – but

some do it not by choice but because they're worried school food might make them sick.

They may have celiac disease, a digestive ailment caused by gluten, or life-threatening allergies to foods like peanuts — both are on the rise. But even as more people become aware of the issues, schools and institutions may lag behind.

Now some food allergy advocates are celebrating what they see as a shifting legal trend: schools and other institutions required to treat food allergies as a disability. They've found an ally in the Department of Justice.

DOJ's Civil Rights Division announced last month that the Americans with Disabilities Act applies to students at Lesley University in Cambridge, Ma., who claimed that the school's food services and meal plans were inadequate for their needs. It was the first food allergy-related settlement under ADA in higher education, says a DOJ spokeswoman.

In the agreement with DOJ, Lesley is required provide gluten- and allergen-free food options in its dining halls, offer special meal plans for students with allergies, and pay $50,000 in damages to the students who filed the claim in 2009, among other measures.

"The Lesley settlement is terrific," Marilyn Geller, chief operating officer of the Celiac Disease Foundation, said. "It puts all universities on notice that they're going to have to make these accommodations for students with celiac, gluten sensitivity and other food allergies."

Food allergies affect about 2 percent of adults and 4 to 8 percent of kids in the U.S., and the number of young people diagnosed with a food allergy has risen in the last decade, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

By applying the ADA to food allergies, the DOJ has essentially turned food into an access issue — akin to providing ramps for

students in wheelchairs.

“By not accommodating food allergies, you’re barring students from participating in the university,” says Maria Acebal, a lawyer and spokeswoman for Food Allergy Research & Education, an advocacy group. “If you can’t get safe food, how can you study there?”

It’s gotten easier to make the case that food allergy is a disability since Congress broadened the scope of the ADA in 2008 with an amendment. The amendment has led to widespread reforms to accommodate people, especially children, with food allergies.

But Geller says there’s still a ways to go, especially for people with celiac disease and gluten sensitivity who have to worry about cross-contamination of their food.

“The problem is that a microscopic amount of gluten for people who are very sensitive can take them down for several days,” says Geller. “So we want schools to take it to the next level and make sure that the gluten-free food is prepared and served in dedicated areas so there’s no cross contamination.”

Cooking classes just for youths

A four-week after school workshop is designed to prepare kids ages 10-12 to take an interactive role with the family meal-planning process.

Youngsters will learn the six nutrient principles of preparing and eating quality nourishing meals. They will be taught how

to shop for healthy food, read and follow recipes, and use basic kitchen tools and equipment.

This workshop is designed to build a foundation for kids to establish healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime.

The workshops are Friday Jan. 11-Feb. 1, 4-6pm at Lake Tahoe Community College. Cost is $99.

Sign up online.

Perfect cup of joe can be complex

By Matt Richtel, New York Times

Tristan Walach has a tattoo of the famous Las Vegas welcome sign on his neck. He goes by the name Ant. He teaches people how to make coffee, professionally.

I have come to learn from him.

“People like you are the best to train,” he says, sizing me up. “You don’t have bad habits or preconceived notions. You’re a blank slate.”

We’re at Sightglass, a cafe near downtown San Francisco with a huge coffee roaster near the front door. But Ant and I are tucked away upstairs, cordoned behind a chain and a sign: “Training in Session.”

Such training centers are increasingly common, and not just at cafes: there are certification classes for baristas and even Camp Pull A-Shot, a four-day, three-night event. And there are

also a growing number of regional and national “throwdowns” to find the most technically proficient, graceful makers of the best-tasting coffee drinks.

Am I skeptical? Well, making coffee, even espresso, roughly entails pouring or pushing water through coffee. Sometimes by flicking a switch or pushing a button. Sure, Ant, you can up my coffee game, and then I’ll spend three days at Camp Let’s Make Oatmeal.

And, hey, I’m not precisely a blank slate. Without any training, I brew a very solid morning latte. And it’s superior to Starbucks, I brag to my wife, using only a $100 espresso maker and beans from a local cafe.

“How hard can coffee be? It’s an attitude we’re constantly encountering,” noted Ellie Matuszak, director of professional development for the Specialty Coffee Association of America, a trade group with thousands of company members and 1,200 people in its growing Barista Guild.

Ant, 34, whose title is director of education, says coffee requires a deft touch. “It’s the most complicated beverage we consume,” he said.

The training center at Sightglass includes a counter with several grinders, an industrial-strength espresso machine, a scale, coffee tampers and other paraphernalia. On a nearby island of reclaimed blond wood are 10 handleless cups, organized in five pairs, each half full of light-brown beans.

But first, we are going to watch Ant’s PowerPoint presentation about where the best beans come from and how they are picked. There is also a slide titled “The Origin Myth.” It’s folklore, a big-bang theory of the discovery of coffee by a goat herder in Ethiopia.

Then it’s time to commence cupping.

This entails smelling the contents of the white cups — beans from Kenya, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, El Salvador and Guatemala. I cannot detect much difference.

Ant then introduces me to the La Marzocco Linea, an espresso maker that runs $8,000 to $10,000. (The really expensive machines, the La Marzocco Strada and the Slayer, are downstairs for the actual baristas.) To its left is a $1,500 Mazzer Major grinder. On top is a button. My job is to push that button, dispensing precisely 19.5 grams of coffee into the filter.

I'm supposed to give the coffee a little sift to even it out, then pack it down with the tamper. Ant shows me how to create about 35 pounds of pressure, a give-or-take amount achieved by bending my knees for leverage and pushing on the tamper until the coffee pushes back.

This step is crucial, Ant says, because otherwise water flows unevenly through the coffee, creating unwanted channels. I press another button, to run the water through the coffee. We press a timer to make sure I leave the water flowing for 25 seconds. Brown and tan espresso flows into the demitasse, which Ant calls the "vessel."

Ant sips. "It's not terribly offensive."

I sip. It is, actually, terribly offensive. Sour and bitter. Ant makes a cup using the same steps. It has a hint of sweetness, just shy of floral, no aftertaste. I make another. Just as bad as my first. Maybe I need milk.

Ant explains how to steam the milk. In brief: position the steam wand just below the milk's surface until the milk swirls in a circular motion and puffs up as it absorbs the steam, then drop the wand lower until the milk reaches 135 degrees, as verified by a thermometer. There's a sweet spot between milk and temperature, the point at which the sugars cook and the milk becomes sweeter, but before the sugars burn.

I try a few times. I make water-thin milk, poured over bitter shots. Finally, I get the milk consistency right, like wet paint. I try a little latte art. It looks like mating amoebas.

Ant offers wisdom: “The difference between a good barista and a great one is the great barista has the courage to toss a shot.” We toss my amoebas in the sink.

I have a second chance coming. I tell Ant that I’m getting more training with Chris Baca at Verve, a cafe and roaster in Santa Cruz. His eyes light up. “He’s great! I trained with him,” he says.

But first, I try to put some of my training to work at home the next morning. I throw out the first three shots. Something is wrong. I was making excellent espresso just the day before. I have actually gotten worse.

Baca, 32, planned to be a high school history teacher. But he dropped out of college and took a job at a cafe in Modesto. He developed a love affair with coffee, moved to San Francisco to work for a trendy cafe called Ritual, then started competing in 2006. In 2010, he finished second out of 50 competitors in the United States Barista Championship. In the freestyle competition, he made a crème anglaise espresso drink, cherry infused with a citrus garnish.

“I know, this all seems like ‘Best in Show,’” says Ryan O’Donovan, an owner of Verve, referring to the faux documentary about dog shows. “It seems ridiculous. We’re trying to make it less ridiculous.”

Verve, where Mr. Baca is director of education, devotes 1,500 square feet to training. It’s part of what the cafe considers the “third wave” of the coffee movement – the first being campfire and drip coffee, the second the Starbucks revolution and the next understanding and evoking the complexity of coffee. Training, O’Donovan says, “is the nucleus of what we do.”

I show Baca what I've learned. He calls my first shot dry. He is being kind.

Baca asked me to bring my usual brand of coffee and makes a shot with it. It is not good. Lesson No. 1: coffee matters. Just because the bag says "fair trade" or "locally roasted" does not mean the highest-grade beans have been selected and put through meticulous roasting. We toss my $13-a-pound coffee in the trash. Then Baca provides a math lesson.

The essence of good espresso, of good coffee in general, revolves around three numbers: the amount of quality dry coffee used, the amount of time water flows through it and the amount of coffee that comes out the other end. When the ratio is right, the process extracts the best flavor. If it is wrong, the good flavor never surfaces or is watered down. A mistake in seconds or grams, I am coming to learn, is the difference between something wonderful and awful.

Baca explains that you have to experiment to find just the right balance of these three elements for each coffee machine and coffee grind, and then replicate them. He has tested the machinery at Sightglass and determined that we want to use 17 grams of high-end coffee and run water for 25 seconds to yield about 30 grams of coffee.

Again, this seems simple, given that the grinder is preset to deliver the grams I want, and I can verify using the scale. All I have to do is press buttons. My first shot tastes foul. But Baca calls my second "bright and snappy."

He shows me how to paint with steamed milk: hold the decanter six inches from the cup, pour a medium-sized stream at a constant rate and when the cup is half filled, lower the decanter close to the cup. When the cup is nearly full, wriggle your hand quickly to create a shape that will make the foam blossom out. Finish with a flourish by drawing a bit of milk through the middle of the design. After a few tries, I'm

able to make something that looks like a pine tree, though I was aiming for a heart.

Great, I am improving. But this is impractical. I buy my coffee preground. I don't own a scale.

"A $10 scale is the best investment you can make for your coffee game," Baca says. And because coffee density and brewing time are so significant, he says, a grinder is not far behind. Some experts say grinding your beans fresh is the most important priority.

Reality check: I'm trying to make it through chaotic mornings at home with a clamoring family. Mr. O'Donovan is amused. Why, he asks, would I make espresso in the morning, let alone latte?

"I make drip coffee," O'Donovan explains. Baca does, too. That's because making a good espresso requires preparation and cleanup. Even when it all goes right, it takes time. Like making a good meal.

"Coffee isn't just coffee," O'Donovan says.

It's "just like anything else," Baca chimes in.

I instantly take his meaning: Coffee — what I assumed was just a simple, necessary thing to start my day — is something more than that. It may not require certification but it does require more attention than I realized.

With my cram session at an end, O'Donovan leaves me with a laugh and a warning: "You're heading down the rabbit hole."

In the ensuing days, I start using the timer on the microwave to make sure I'm pulling my espresso shots for 25 seconds. I troll the Internet for counsel on what might be a next-step espresso maker. But even with my old gear and a bit of leftover coffee from Sightglass, my shots have gotten discernibly better, and occasionally good.

I place an order for coffee from Verve. When two different roasts arrive and I make a show of my excitement, my wife rolls her eyes. She challenges whether I can even tell the difference between the new coffee and two other blends I used to swear by. So we do a blind smell test.

I nail it. My wife seems surprised; who is this new discerning creature? Just getting started, I tell her. Wait until you see what we can do with milk.

California wineries forecast healthy sales in 2013

By Chris Rauber, San Francisco Business Times

A surprisingly healthy Bay Area wine grape harvest in 2012 is bolstering spirits of local vineyard and winery owners, while weak harvests in France and other competitors is another short-term boost.

That doesn’t mean the region’s wine industry is entirely out of the woods, after several tough years, but it gives folks some things to be happy about, along with stronger sales in some categories.

“We’ve seen an upswing in our sales” in 2012, said Tim Persson, recently appointed CEO of Napa’s Hess Collection winery. “It’s been very welcome, after several years of intermittent results.”

Persson, who started as chief executive in July, said the industry as a whole is benefiting from the broader economic recovery and is experiencing something of a supply-demand

rebalancing after years of “a glut of supply relative to demand” in international wine markets.

But Bay Area wineries still face dangerous potential icebergs, including the fears that “debt wranglings” in Washington, D.C., could tip the economy back into recession or otherwise weaken the value of the dollar.

Dangers more specific to the wine business also lurk in the coming year and the years ahead.

“The wine business itself is very robust and has pulled out of the recession pretty nicely,” said Rob Carrol, a San Francisco-based partner at Nixon Peabody LLP law firm and head of its Beverage Alcohol Group. But some higher-priced wines could continue to suffer since recession-tutored consumers “realize there are some fine wines at the lower price levels.”

Carrol and others, including Persson, believe the industry is likely to see further consolidation in coming years at all levels, from the rapidly merging distribution channels to vineyards and wineries in the Bay Area’s backyard.

2012 – a good year for California wine growers

By Chris Macias, Sacramento Bee

There’s plenty to toast among the local wine region, which enjoyed a fairly solid 2012. An ideal growing season, new businesses and increasing recognition from national media added up to a choice year for the greater Sacramento area’s wine season.

Here are some of the ways in which 2012 rocked in terms of wine:

• Mother Nature: After two years of unseasonable weather and lighter than normal harvests, 2012's growing season offered some much-needed salvation. This year's statewide wine grape crop is projected to reach 3.7 million tons, a 10 percent jump over 2011 and a tie with the second-largest harvest on record. For a domestic wine industry facing possible supply shortages, 2012 was like a reassuring hug from Mother Nature.

• Positive press: The greater Sacramento region's wine offerings continued to land on the national media radar. After a lengthy feature on the Sierra foothills in 2011, the *San Francisco Chronicle* came back this year listing El Dorado County in "5 California wine areas to watch."

Wine Enthusiast also featured a big spread this year on Sierra foothills wine country, while Eric Asimov of the *New York Times* recommended the Edmunds St. John 2009 El Dorado County Bone-Jolly Gamay Noir in his "memorable bottles for $20" column.

• The China connection: Delegations from China made numerous visits to Lodi in 2012, tasting the region's wine and seeking new trade partners. Given the rapidly growing wine market in China, and increasingly seeking value-friendly California brands, this relationship could bode well for the region's wine business for years to come.

7-Eleven stocking shelves

with healthier items

By Stephanie Strom, New York Times

7-Eleven, the convenience store chain, is restocking its shelves with an eye toward health. Over the last year, the retailer has introduced a line of fresh foods for the calorie conscious and trimmed down its more indulgent fare by creating portion-size items.

The change is as much about consumers' expanding waistlines as the company's bottom line. By 2015, the retailer aims to have 20 percent of sales come from fresh foods in its American and Canadian stores, up from about 10 percent currently, according to a company spokesman.

"We're aspiring to be more of a food and beverage company, and that aligns with what the consumer now wants, which is more tasty, healthy, fresh food choices," said Joseph M. DePinto, the chief executive of 7-Eleven, a subsidiary of the Japanese company, Seven & i Holdings.

Convenience stores have typically been among the most nimble of retailers. In the 1980s, they added Pac-Man arcade games as a way to keep customers in stores longer and to buy more merchandise. They installed A.T.M.'s a decade later, taking a slice of the transaction fees. More recently, they built refrigerated dairy cases, with milk, eggs, cheese and other staples.

But just as they have taken business from traditional supermarkets, convenience stores have faced increased competition from the likes of Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks, which offer a basic menu of fresh foods for consumers on the go.

At the same time, a major profit driver for convenience stores — cigarettes — has been in steady decline over the last decade

as the rate of smoking has dropped in the United States.

Fresh foods can help offset some of those losses. The markup on such merchandise can be significant, bolstering a store's overall profits. It's also a fast-growing category.

"If you can figure out how to deliver consistent quality and the products consumers want, fresh food is attractive because margins are higher, and it addresses some of the competitive issues you're facing," said Richard Meyer, a longtime consultant for the convenience store industry. "But it's not easy to do."

7-Eleven has been selling fresh food since the late 1990s. But much of its innovation has been limited to the variety of hot dogs spinning on the roller grill or the breakfast sandwiches languishing beneath a heating lamp.

As 7-Eleven refocuses its lineup, the retail chain has assembled a team of culinary and food science experts to study industry trends and develop new products. Such groups have been around for a while at fast-food restaurants like McDonald's and packaged-goods manufacturers like Kraft. But it's a relatively new concept for players like 7-Eleven, which have typically relied on their suppliers to provide product innovation.

"We're working to create a portfolio of fresh foods," said Anne Readhimer, senior director of fresh food innovation, who joined the company in May from Yum Brands, where she had worked on the KFC and Pizza Hut brands. "Some will be for snacking, some for a quick meal, but we hope everything we offer our guests is convenient and tasty."

One new menu item just hitting stores is a Bistro Snack Protein Pack, which includes mini pita rounds, cheddar cheese cubes, grapes, celery, baby carrots and hummus. The meal in a box, similar to one carried by Starbucks, is part of a broader menu with healthier items under 400 calories.

The company is also taking existing products and retooling them for single portions. For example, customers can now buy jelly doughnuts and tacos, in mini sizes.

“There are definitely customers who want healthy options, but there are also lots of customers who are excited about the new sandwich options that aren’t low calorie – and minidoughnuts are doing very well,” said Lori Primavera, senior manager of fresh food innovation at 7-Eleven, who previously worked for Food and Drink Resources, a consulting firm for restaurant companies.

Norman Jemal, a franchisee, said sales of the new products are growing steadily in the three 7-Eleven stores that he owns in Manhattan. “At first, people are surprised when they come in here and see a bag of carrots and celery,” Jemal said. “They say, ‘I came in here for a bag of chips – I can’t believe you have fruit cups or yogurt cups.’ ”

He said the Yoplait Parfait, a cup of vanilla yogurt topped with fresh strawberries or blueberries and granola, is his best-selling fresh food item, while the 7 Smart turkey sandwich is his top sandwich.

The fresh food in Jemal’s stores and other locations around the country are supplied from a system of 29 commissaries and bakeries that fulfill orders from 7-Eleven. They tailor menu items for specific markets. In the Miami area, they produce a hot Cuban sandwich with ham, cheese, pickles and mustard. The Turkey Gobbler with turkey, stuffing and cranberry sauce sells in Northeastern stores around the holidays.

Each store has a data system that allows it to see exactly what is selling, which helps manage waste. Stores can track consumers’ purchase habits over a month, and adjust their orders based on those behaviors.

“In this 28-day cycle, I know I sold 3,563 bananas to customers in this store,” said Tom Ferguson, who owns five 7-

Eleven locations in Las Vegas.

Ferguson has owned 7-Eleven franchises since 1986, and he said the variety of fresh food options in the stores is far better than before. The category already accounts for 20 percent of his sales, and his goal is to reach a quarter of sales volume.

“We used to be a place for people to buy beer, wine, cigarettes, candy and chips, and people would occasionally ask where they could go to get something to eat,” Ferguson said. “We’re no longer getting that question because now you can get something to eat right here.”